

Permanent Flows Ordered to Restore Owens River Gorge

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After decades of court proceedings, the Owens River Gorge has begun to receive additional water to help restore historic fish populations and increase fishing opportunities.

The Mono County Superior Court recently approved an agreement between the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, Mono County and the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power that will govern Owens River flows in the 19-mile reach between Crowley Lake and Pleasant Valley Reservoir. The agreement will not affect Crowley Lake for recreation and water storage. The new flows have already begun and will be fully phased in over a three-year period.

The Owens River Gorge was once known as one of the best brown trout fisheries in California. The fishery was eliminated by a system of hydroelectric power plants which did not provide bypass fish flows. Under the court order, restoration of higher flows and seasonal flow variation will breathe new life into the lower 10 miles of the gorge by expanding habitat for brown trout, scouring sediments that currently choke the pools and gravels, and promoting the establishment of riparian forest. Flows in the upper gorge below Crowley Dam will remain unchanged in the foreseeable future to protect Owens tui chubs, a native endangered fish.

Implementation of these new flows is a culmination of decades of scientific studies and negotiations. The settlement was influenced by and reflects recent developments in public trust law, especially deriving from the historic Mono Lake decision. In a time when fishing access is at a premium, this is great news for California anglers and anyone who enjoys the outdoors.

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